

Per Jacobsen

DEFINITENESS AND INDEFINITENESS IN SERBO-CROATIAN

Traditionally the Serbo-Croatian adjective is described as consisting of two categories viz. a definite and an indefinite which determine the nouns to which they are attributed. Thus the category of definiteness well known from Germanic and Romance languages but unknown to Slavonic (apart from Bulgarian and Macedonian) is claimed, at least partly, to be present in modern Serbo-Croatian.

Grammarians from Vuk Karadžić on compare more or less explicitly the two forms of the Serbo-Croatian adjective with the category of definiteness in other languages:

"Prilagatelna imena Prvoga reda svršavaju se u muškome rodu jedinstvenog broja dvojako, t. j. na poluglasno slovo ili na i: zašto mi govorimo i slušamo *de se govori n. p. dobar i dobri, zelen i zeleni* (...) prvo stoji u prvome svom obliku i pokazuje kakvoću neizvjesne stvari (My underlining) (...) A ovo drugo načinjeno (s dodatkom i) od prvoga, i kakvoćom opredeljuje stvar (My underlining) (na pitanje *koji?* kao Njemački člen *der, die, das*)..."

Vuk St. Karadžić: *Srpski Rječnik*, p. XLII, Wien 1918

"... ausserdem haben die meisten Adjektive noch zwei verschiedene Deklinationen - eine *unbestimmte* und eine *bestimmte*, von welchen die letztere dann angevendet wird, wenn das Adjektiv als Attribut eines schon bekannten oder erwähnten Subjekts dient, während in alle übrigen die unbestimmte Deklination am Platze ist. Die unbestimmte Form des Adjektives (...) entspricht somit in der Regel einem deutschen Adjektiv, dem weder ein Artikel noch ein Pronomen oder dem bloss der unbestimmten Artikel vorausgeht, die bestimmte Form dagegen einem solchen Adjektiv, das entweder mit dem bestimmten Artikel oder mit einem Pronomen verbunden ist; in Fällen also wie "der gute

Freund; mein guter Freund; dieser gute Freund; verwendet man im Sk. eine bestimmte Form des Adjektivs "gut", dagegen in Fällen wie "der Freund ist gut; guter Freund; ein guter Freund" gebraucht man eine unbestimmte Form".

Milan Rešetar: *Elementar-Grammatik der serbischen (kroatischen) Sprache*, p.60-61, Zagreb 1922

"L'adjectif présente au nominatif et à l'accusatif singuliers, et partiellement à d'autres cas, deux formes différentes, suivant que le groupe nominal dont il fait partie est indéterminé ou déterminé. On distingue ainsi *mlad brać* "un jeune frère" de *mladi brać* "le jeune frère". En pareil cas, le serbo-croate a un moyen de rendre l'opposition de l'article indéfini "un" et de l'article défini "le", qui autrement n'a pas d'expression constante...

A. Meillet, A. Vaillant: *Grammaire de la langue serbo-croate*, p. 100, Paris 1952

In the first edition of his novel "Seobe", Miloš Crnjanski as a motto for the first chapter wrote the famous words: "*Beskrajan plavi krug. U njemu zvezda*". According to all rules and norms of the Serbo-Croatian language *beskrajan plavi krug* is unacceptable: how could the same noun be defined as indefinite and definite at one and the same time? In later editions Crnjanski's obvious faux pas was corrected to "*Beskrajni plavi krug*" and the alarming contradiction of the phrase done away with.

In a diachronic perspective the short forms of the adjective are on the decline. (I prefer the strictly formal terms *long* and *short* to the traditional *definite* and *indefinite*). From a nominal paradigm which may still be seen as an exhibit in some grammars, the short adjectives have in common usage ended up in the pronominal paradigm except for the forms of nominative singular and plural, of which only the masculine singular represents a real formal difference, not only in the written but in spoken language as well. Besides, the number of long adjectives without corresponding short forms is considerably larger than the number of adjectives with long and short forms, and the former group seems to increase at the expense of the latter. This neutralisation of formal oppositions, together with the fact that there are oppositions other than definiteness and indefiniteness involved, has made the use of the two adjectival forms a major problem for grammarians and normativists. Thus Lalević in his manual of correct language can state: "*mnogi učeni ljudi ponekad pogreše u upotrebi određenog i neodređenog oblika pridevskog*". M.S. Lalević: *Srpsko-hrvatski u mom džepu*, p. 1006, Beograd 1963.

It is the intention of this paper to point out the semantic content of the long and the short adjectives and to relate them to their morphologic content for it is most unlikely that Lalević's statement holds good either for the Crnjanski quotation or for a long succession of eminent Yugoslav writers' and scholars' use of adjectives. This may be seen in the following examples:

bacao se tvrd pjesnivi komis (M. Krleža, *Hrvatski bog Mars*, Zagreb 1965, p. 23)

u udoban topli mir (A. Šoljan, *Nikola Šubić Zrinski*, Zagreb 1965, p. 403)

mračan, ukleti san (Ivo Frangeš, *Riječ okrenut zvijezdama, Matoš, Vidrić, Krleža*, Zagreb 1974, p. 236)

malo astmatičan sijedi gospodin (M. Krleža: *Hrvatski bog Mars*, Zagreb 1965, p. 245)

Ne mislim, na kraju, ni na izvrstan kratki članak Šime Vučetića... (Stanko Lasić, *Sukob na književnoj ljevici*, p. 156)

...njihov vulgaran i nizak, ali živopisan i zanimljiv život (Jovan Skerlić: *Istorije novije srpske književnosti*, Beograd 1953, p. 354)

Kopitar je skretao pažnju na ovaj značajan posao. (Skerlić, *ibidem*, p. 247)

njegov potlačen, bespomoćan položaj (Miodrag Pavlović: *Jugoslovenska Novela*, p. 242).

Let us examine in a little more detail the relationship between long and short adjectives and their respective nouns in noun phrases. I see three types of relationship between the long adjectives and the nouns to which they are attributed.

1. The first type is found in phrases like *rodni kraj*, *radni dan*, *kulturni život* etc. Such adjectives are derived from nouns and their meaning directly related to these nouns; according to the Matica dictionary the mentioned adjectives mean 'koji se odnosi na rođenje, na rad, na kulturu'. The corresponding short adjectives *rodan*, *radan*, *kulturnan* have different meanings, they are not simply synonymous with the long forms ÷ a morphological content definiteness: *rodan* means 'sposoban na rađanje, plodan, koji rađa

izobilno', *radan* means 'koji voli da radi, vredan' and *kulturan* 'koji stoji na visokom stupnju kulture, koji se odlikuje kulturom, lepo odgojen, vaspitan'.

Syntagmas with long adjectives of this type correspond to compounds in some Germanic languages: German Arbeitstag (*radni dan*) Danish fdeegn (*rodni kraj*) German Kulturarbeiter (*kulturni radnik*) etc. and they cannot be paraphrased into *dan je radan*, *kraj je rodan* and *radnik je kulturan* without changing content.

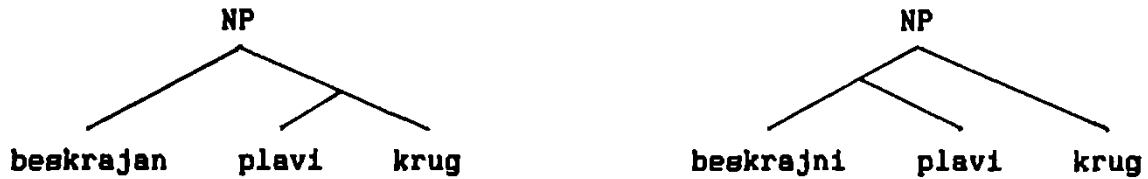
2. The second type we find in noun phrases like *slapi miš*, *Novi Sad*, *stari svat*, *crni luk*, *vanredni profesor* etc. These adjectives are derived as well as underived and together with certain nouns - i.e. not with all - they form a lexical unity of their own in which the adjective has more or less lost its lexical content. These syntagmas also correspond to compounds and sometimes even have a real compound as parallel form: *starosvat* = *stari svat*, *belobor* = *beli bor*. Moreover it is possible to form a compound adjective of the whole syntagma: *novosadski*, *starosavetski* etc.

3. The third type of relation we find in all the examples from the grammars where the long adjectives define a noun and thus correspond to the definite articles in other languages. In contradistinction to the first two types which deal with semantic relations between the adjective and the noun, this type of relation is morphological because the grammatical category definiteness is involved. This category is defective in Serbo-Croatian because the opposition between the members of the category, on the whole is neutralized in the oblique cases and to a great extent in the vocabulary itself.

The short adjective is first and foremost semantically marked, a fact which is underlined by the use of only this form in predicative function: *ovek je mlad*, *vazduh je sveŹ* etc.

In sentences like *ovek je mlad* a quality of the noun is explicitly pointed out and this semantic markedness of the short adjective in predicative position is transferred to the short adjectives in attributive position. Thus when the above quoted writers wrote their "absurd" or "incorrect" noun phrase they were in fact talking about "the blue circle, which possessed the particular quality of being endless" (Crnjanski) or stressing that "the mouldy loaf which was thrown was hard (KrleŹa), that "Mr Vueti's short paper was excellent" (Lasi) or that "their lives were extremely vulgar and disgraceful but picturesque and interesting" (Skerli) etc. etc. The structures of the noun phrases *beskrajn*

plavi krug and *bekrajni plavi krug* can be illustrated as follows:



Several pairs of oppositions are present in the adjectival system. Some of them are semantic oppositions:

known/unknown: *kišoviti London/maglovit Akropolis*
 conventional/specific: *slepi miš/slep miš*
 permanent/temporary: *strani jezik/stran jezik*
 relative/concrete: *kulturni život/kulturan život*

and one is morphological:

definite/indefinite: *mladi čovek/mlad čovek*

The semantic features unknown, specific, temporary and concrete are marked in relation to the features known, conventional, permanent and relative and the morphological feature definite is marked in relation to indefinite, which may be illustrated by the following scheme:

	semantically marked	+ sem. markedness ÷
definiteness	÷	long adjectives
+ definiteness ÷	short adj.	long adjectives (<i>slepi miš</i>)